

# DETRACTION.



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*"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."*—

This is one of the commandments written on tables of stone by the finger of God. It has never been abrogated. Reader! perhaps thou supposest the application of it was meant to be confined to the enormous sin of Perjury. I apprehend however, it will be found to embrace a more common and less obvious sin, of which it may be thou art not thyself wholly innocent—that of Detraction.

Detraction! that bane so destructive to the happiness of society! who can enumerate the catalogue of evils, of sufferings, of injuries, of unmerited cruelties, that have been inflicted by it?

This is a subject which, there is cause to fear, does not claim the attention of the respectable and well educated, nor even of that portion of society, denominated the religious, to a degree consistent with their respective characters; and what is of greater moment, in a manner calculated to evince their sense of its magnitude, its sinfulness, and its incompatibility with moral and religious principle. It is the *thinking* part of the community, who have it in their power to effect much by the influence of their example, that I would particularly (but not exclusively) address, and invite to reflection upon a topic fraught with so much evil and followed by consequences so distressing, so destructive of the happiness of individuals and of families, and which is not unfrequently the means of sowing the seeds of dissension throughout social and religious society.

*"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."* Perhaps, Reader! thou mayst be ready to repel the sentiment that detraction may be justly deemed a breach of this commandment, or without due reflection mayst be tempted to exclaim, "I never bore false witness against my neighbour. If ever I repeated what was to the disadvantage of another, it was the truth. I either received it from good authority, or knew it myself; and moreover, I spoke of it confidentially. I therefore do not stand convicted of bearing false witness."

Let it be admitted that thou wert innocent of *intentional* detraction, the truth thou felt at liberty to commit to another, reflected obloquy upon the character of thy neighbour; and if thou thinkest thou wert not guilty of a violation of the commandment in question, thou must confess thyself to have been so of another equal in authority: "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

But the commandment is *very* comprehensive—"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." Hast thou, who art so careful in reporting *only the truth*, and that confidentially, never given that truth a colouring calculated to increase the apparent magnitude of thy neighbour's fault, or by any means made the offender appear more guilty than he really was? If so, thou hast broken the commandment, for every departure from the straight line of *Truth* is an entrance upon the borders of falsehood; and a representation becomes false witness, just in proportion as the impression made by it exceeds the reality.

Under the Jewish law, it was considered a high misdemeanour to raise or propagate an evil report, to say or do aught that would injure a man in his character or his property; and very offensive was it in the Divine sight. "Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I cut off." "A false witness, and him that soweth discord among brethren," are mentioned among those things which "the Lord doth hate; which are an abomination unto him."— — — There are so many shades of turpitude in this prevailing evil, it is not practicable to bring them all into view here; and startling as the sentiment may appear, observation induces me to believe that few, very few, even among professed Christians, have wholly washed their hands from this defilement.

Many I trust have no evil intention when they indulge a propensity to dwell upon the faults of others, and retail what they have heard or seen; but the absence of intended injury will not prevent the sad consequences of a thoughtless, nay more, of a cruel and debasing habit, the desolations and long sustained difficulties inflicted by which are not to be recounted.

Ages have past since the Beneficent Parent of the human family first issued the positive mandate, "Thou shalt not go up and down as a Talebearer among thy people;" yet unhappily to the present day there remain those who allow themselves to cherish and to exercise such a disposition toward their fellows, as would lead one to conclude they had, regardless of the high command, fully adopted the rebellious language, "our lips are our own, who is Lord over *us*?" and who do indeed verify the declarations of Solomon and of David, "There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword."—"They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent, adder's poison is under their lips." There are still those, who, actuated by secret prejudice, and perhaps envy, or by passions repugnant to every principle of human kindness, allow themselves to slander and defame without regard to truth; and well were they described by the Royal Prophet, when he prayed the Almighty to hide him from

those "who whet their tongues like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows, even bitter words."

David had large experience of the sufferings, and sorrows, and injustice inflicted by evil speaking. Solomon, who was admirably versed in the treachery and deceitfulness of the human heart, and who was also well acquainted with the divine law in relation to man, has left many wise and pertinent sayings on the subject of detraction. Indeed, the character of this vice is held up in very strong colours by most, if not all, the sacred writers. Numerous passages throughout the Jewish laws, the writings of the Prophets, Evangelists, and Apostles, and the sayings of Christ himself, might be cited, which go to denounce the practice and the spirit of detraction; and many of them to declare the judgments of the Most High against those who are guilty of it.

It would seem that there is a powerful propensity inherent in the unregenerate heart of man, to lessen the esteem of one part of the human family for another;—a seed of selfishness sown by *him* who envied the happiness of our first parents, and sought to bring them down to his own level. Truly, "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" Now, can we believe that the fashionable politeness, which those who consider themselves the well educated and refined observe in their intercourse with each other and with the world, is genuine, or springs even from the finer feelings of natural benevolence and kindness? or that those reputed to be thinking men act under the influence of sober reflection, and a sense of justice, or that professing Christians cultivate in themselves, and exercise towards others, the virtues that constitute the Christian character, among which love to our neighbour stands prominently forth, while we are obliged by constant evidence to *know* that detraction is not *only* to be found where every evil plant grows openly and unrestrained, but that even among these it flourishes with baleful vigour?

There is a species of detraction which possibly may not have been recognized as such, even by some serious Christian Professors. Familiarity with its existence among those whom they esteem better than themselves, may have made them think, should they hear of or suspect something wrong in the conduct of a neighbour, that it is but natural, and not incorrect, to repeat it confidentially to another—very cautiously, perhaps, and with expressions of regret and sorrow. But the confidant whispers it to a third, who in his turn deposits it with a fourth—and thus it travels, until an extensive circle becomes possessed of the supposed fact with all the increase of odium that may have

been attached to it by various versions of the story. Mean time, the unconscious and perhaps innocent individual has no opportunity afforded him of explanation or defence. Serious persons, should their apprehensions arise only from what they may think pretty certain *indications*, will perhaps at first feel some care respecting their dissemination; but an opportunity presenting when with those to whom they are accustomed to unbosom freely, and the conversation leading to it, they venture to suggest that a certain friend or neighbour seems to be in a dangerous way—it may be in his pecuniary concerns—in his morals, or in his religious character.—In this case, it is supposed there is no design to injure the individual in the least possible degree, and that, on the contrary, there is real sorrow and regret felt for him; yet an injudicious expression of these very feelings may be the means of subjecting him to a narrow and prejudiced inquisition, give rise to talk and misapprehension, awaken suspicion in minds not sufficiently discreet or scrupulous, and thus darken the otherwise fair character of an individual (it may be a young person dependent, under Providence, on his own efforts and good reputation) with a stain it will cost him much to wipe away, and which *may* go with him through life.

So, also, a fellow-member of the church may be suspected of giving place to temptation, of departing in deed or doctrine from the narrow path, of swerving from a course heretofore honourable and useful; we are zealous for his welfare, but, forgetting the Saviour's injunction, first to tell *him* his fault and not the world, nor even the brethren, till every word be well established, subject him to the same process; and nine times out of ten he is a very great sufferer by it. For, if the suspicion be well founded, he has not received that candid brotherly treatment which might have regained him, and if only the fruit of jealousy or prejudice, many have been alienated from him without a cause, and he, with the church, has suffered loss. We have given him reason to say with the Prophet, of his injuries, "Those are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends;" and with the Psalmist to complain, "It was not an enemy that reproached me, then could I have borne it; neither was it he that hated me, that did magnify himself against me; then I would have hid myself from him; but it was *thou*, a man—mine equal—my guide and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked unto the house of God in company."

It is indeed astonishing, when we take a serious and impartial view of the nature and tendency of detraction, and see how numerous have been the sufferers by it, how great their

sufferings—and how directly incompatible it is, with the command of our blessed Saviour, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” and with common kindness or humanity, that it should continue to exist in Christian communities! But that it does, and that its fruits are too plainly evident among us, is a sorrowful fact. In this Christian age, often may the language be adopted, “False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not.”

Can it be that we are familiar with the contents of our Bibles, that we peruse and reperuse the abundant testimonies there recorded, against all unkind and selfish feeling,—against envy, jealousy, maliciousness, wrath, bitterness, evil speaking, or evil surmising; and against rash judging, and believe indeed that they were written by holy men moved by the Holy Ghost, and even that many of them are the words of God himself?

Did we truly imbibe the spirit of those sacred precepts, we should be very tender of the reputation of our neighbour, very cautious of doing him an injury, very careful in all our deportment towards him. Even our gestures, looks, and tones of voice, would be guarded; for, by these alone, much mischief may be done, and lasting wounds inflicted.

Sometimes, by unguarded conversation, we are led to conclusions from premises, the foundation of which we have not ascertained, and which, perhaps, only exist in the imagination of the speaker. One for some reason *apprehends* that a certain thing has been done, or is likely to be done. A suspicious and careless hearer infers or understands that it has already taken place; and so reports it abroad, however disadvantageous to the party concerned. It becomes the subject of conversation in different circles, and finally is woven into a tale that passes for absolute fact. Many a calumny has travelled far and wide, whose origin has been as small and unjustifiable as this; and the destruction of confidence and esteem among friends once dear to each other has been the consequence.

We may seek to palliate such indiscretion, or endeavour to cover ourselves from censure, by saying the story was no fabrication of ours, and that we never could have dreamed the mere hint we dropped would have produced such unpleasant consequences;—but how slight a covering for us is this, when, by failing faithfully to repress the first risings of a temptation to break the law of kindness, we have inflicted mortification and pain upon a fellow being!

And is there *no remedy* for this growing deformity, which, like a leprosy, cleaves so closely to the human race? must it continue to invade the peace and mar the happiness of indivi-

duals, of families, and of communities? Would that we possessed a more just sense of the tenderness we owe each other, as fallen and erring creatures, subject to be taken captive by our unwearied foe in moments of weakness! that a faithful watch were set at the door of our lips, to prevent the breath of slander from assailing the innocent, or magnifying the faults of the guilty! "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise."

The proper cultivation and storing of the mind with useful knowledge, would be an important auxiliary in the cause; it would tend to direct our conversation towards subjects of permanent interest and utility, and it would weaken that strong propensity of our social circles to criticize the conduct and character, and to dwell upon the mistakes and foibles of our fellows.

But there is a remedy, an *effectual* remedy, one that would essentially promote our own happiness, while it saved others from the pain which we have no right to inflict.

It is found in the commandments so emphatically enforced by our Holy Redeemer. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment, and the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

This is the dignified mark to which Christians are called to aspire, and it is only in proportion as we advance towards this mark, that we shall be redeemed from the spirit of detraction, and become conformed to the Apostolic exhortation, "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another, in honour preferring one another."

Let Christian professors awake to the signs of the times! Let them observe the complexion of the day! a day in which there appears much solicitude to establish views and doctrines adverse to each other, by reference to the Holy Scriptures; and much clashing of sentiment upon various points. Let them awake to the inconsistency of contending for those sacred writings as a standard of doctrine, while they so generally overlook its exhortations and injunctions to equity, mercy, and truth; while they stand in need daily to be reminded, that the Holy Bible admits not of a contentious, a censorious, or intolerant spirit, of jealousies, evil surmisings, rash judging or condemning one another; but requires meekness, forbearance, long suffering, gentleness, kindness.

Notwithstanding all the plain precepts of the Gospel, and a high profession of reverence for the inspired volume, we see

our public prints teeming with acrimony and party zeal, and even men, who esteem themselves followers of a meek and lowly Redeemer, engaged in fierce contention, indulging freely the spirit of detraction, and, with little charity or justice, misrepresenting, judging, and condemning each other. Were the Apostles of our common Lord witnesses of so sad a scene, with what holy zeal and love for souls would they not exclaim, "Brethren, these things ought not so to be!" "Why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at naught thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." Let us remember, "With what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." And that this is the awful declaration of him who is appointed to judge the world, "the man Christ Jesus."

Conscious of inability to do full justice to a subject so important to the happiness and well being of society, I nevertheless desire to draw as I can, the attention of the serious to the strongly marked features of the present period, and to sober reflection upon the necessity of greater watchfulness, and of experiencing an increase of the benign spirit of him whom we call Lord, to accompany us in our daily walking, in all our intercourse with the world, and in our private circles. May we endeavour to keep in constant remembrance the spirit of the Apostle's words: "Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?"

Reader! in attempting to help others, we sometimes receive help ourselves. I offer these remarks therefore to thee with sincere wishes for our mutual improvement, with a hope that henceforward we may individually try to promote the happiness and peace of society by the exercise of true Christian kindness. "The servant of God must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient: in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." "The end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves, for charity shall cover the multitude of sins."

THE END.